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ABSTRACT

This paper converges Shelby Steele's discussion on issues facing African-American students in his 1990 book, "The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America" (which argues in part that a self-defeating preoccupation with race reduces their academic performance), with education majors' concerns about teaching culturally diverse students identified from a recent survey. First examined is Steele's perspective on black students in America. The major theme is that African-Americans as a group harbor feelings of inferiority in racially integrated settings, and thus seek reassurance through race which only further inhibits academic and personal progress. Juxtaposed to this is the finding that research examining teachers' professional concerns indicates that teachers harbor considerable concerns about dealing with culturally diverse students, a general fear of a lack of necessary skills in teaching minority students, a sense of lower expectations of African-American students, and a fear that race would become an issue in the classroom as an excuse for low performance. Survey results suggest that teachers may be predisposed to identify African-American students as being responsible for their own substandard performance and under-challenge them as a result. Contains seven references. (GLR)

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JUXTAPOSING STEELE'S THESIS ON THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT AND PRE-SERVICE EDUCATION MAJORS' CONCERNS ABOUT TEACHING DIVERSE STUDENTS

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Juxtaposing Steele's Thesis on The African-American Student and Pre-Service Education Majors' Concerns About Teaching Diverse Students

INTRODUCTION

In recent times perspectives on certain socio-politico issues have assumed a certain speculative level of prominence. Of particular interest to analysts of this phenomenon are the viewpoints expressed by neo-conservatives on the seemingly sacrosanct issues that have historically been embraced by minority communities. Discussions proffered by neo-conservatives have aroused debate about various aspects of life in U.S. society. However, the impact these viewpoints stand to have on specific programs influencing the schooling of minority students provokes special concern.

Support for what might be considered the multi-faceted conservative political agenda is being witnessed among members of groups traditionally associated with more liberal orientations. Among the more frequently quoted African-American neo-conservatives is Shelby Steele, a professor of English at San Jose State University in California.

Quoted widely in the popular press, Steele is the author of The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America. In this book Steele presents an impassioned, though controversial argument regarding the status of African-American students in the academy. He proposes that an insidious sense of inferiority pervades the African-American student psyche, and that a self-

defeating preoccupation with race largely explains the generally sub-standard performance of African-American students (as compared with white American students) in universities throughout the nation.

The purpose of this presentation will be to converge Steele's discussion on issues facing African-American students in schools and universities with data collected in a recent survey of pre-service education majors' concerns about working with culturally diverse students.

STEELE'S PERSPECTIVE ON BLACK STUDENTS IN AMERICA

The Content of Our Character is an exploration of the irony between the historic nature of Black/White race relations in the U.S., and the real implications presented to Blacks if they were actually to be judged by the content of their character. In this regard, Steele proposes that African-Americans amass destructive, self-defeating power in **not** being judged by the content of their character.

This book is a complex examination of the impact of innocence, victimization, and entitlement on U.S. race relations. Steele masterfully examines the real implications of these issues in a treatise to Americans in general, and to African-Americans in particular. And although he proposes the two races share culpability for America's sustained racialism through their unique approaches to the innocence-victimization-entitlement trilogy, the message he offers each group differs considerably.

Taken in its entirety, The Content of Our Character is clearly an acrimonious plea to African-Americans.

A major theme of this work is that African-Americans (as a group) harbor feelings of inferiority in racially integrated settings. Steele refers to the discomfort blacks feel as the convergence of race-holding, race baiting and racial anxiety. He indicates that

> in situations where we must engage the mainstream society, . . . racial anxiety increas[es] our self-doubt and undermine[s] our confidence so that we often back away from the challenges that, if taken, would advance us. (p. 39)

Steele suggests that race holding is manifested in the African-American who "feels inadequate or insecure and then seeks reassurance through race" (p. 29). Using his own experiences as a professor of English, he contends that racial anxiety, race baiting, and race holding are especially prevalent in the educational arena. He notes

> [f]or some years I have noticed that I can walk into any of my classes on the first day of the semester, identify the black students, and be sadly confident that on the last day of the semester a disproportionate number of them will be at the bottom of the class, far behind any number of white students of equal or even lesser native ability (pp. 26-27).

Steele contends that although historically, societal institutions have supported racist policies committed to the inferiority of African-Americans, in recent times blacks themselves have been responsible for the perpetuation of these myths of black inferiority.

He suggests that at the heart of improving race relations and effecting true equality for African-Americans will be both the will and the courage (on the part of blacks) to explore the psychological realm of racial integration. Steele suggests

> [t]he barriers to black progress. . . are clearly as much psychological as they are social or economic. . . [b]ut we haven't fully admitted this to ourselves. . . . . [A] risk is involved in exploring [the psychological realm] [that is]: the risk of discovering the ways in which we contribute to, if not create, the reality in which we live. (p. 34)

It is only through psychological exploration, Steele contends, that African-Americans will come to know the extent to which we have personally internalized the second class status that in the past was imposed upon us by pervasive racist policies.

This core theme, internalized inferiority, will now be juxtaposed with data collected in a recent survey of pre-service education majors at a major university.

A SURVEY OF PRE-SERVICE TEACHER CONCERNS

Research addressing teachers' professional concerns

indicates that teachers do not acquire specific "energy-directed" interests in the needs of their students (e.g. engaging in tasks to identify students strengths or weaknesses) until the teachers' own needs for security and comfort in the teaching role have been satisfied (Fuller, 1969; Fuller and Bown, 1975; Katz, 1972; Gehrke, 1989; Marshall, et al., 1990). Prior to the resolution of this professional role-conflict stage, although teachers are interacting with students, the extent to which their time and energy is directed toward identifying and addressing the specific needs of students is minimal (Katz, 1972; Marshall, et al., 1990).

This professional dilemma of the classroom teacher is exacerbated by the reality of teaching in culturally diverse settings. Teachers in such settings have varying, perhaps hierarchial levels of concern. Initially, they must resolve concerns relative to their own need for security in the professional role; then they must work to address concerns related to developing skill at meeting the learning needs of students in the majority culture (i.e. employing the professional skills acquired in pre-service preparation). Finally, if they are to be maximally effective, teachers in culturally pluralistic school settings must acknowledge and address concerns relative to meeting the schooling needs of non-white students.

For good or ill, it is this third level of teacher concern that has the greatest impact on the schooling experiences of

today's African-American students. Further, through exploration of this third concern level we may discover that Steele's internalized inferiority thesis has major implications for teacher receptivity to meeting the school needs of non-white students.

In a recent survey of undergraduate education majors were asked to respond to an open ended survey regarding teaching concerns (Marshall, in progress). Respondents were instructed to list the concerns they have (or concerns they believe others may have) about working with culturally diverse students. The term "culturally diverse student" was generally defined as students from non-white racial backgrounds. Because the preponderance of non-white students in the immediate teaching area surrounding the university are African-American, it was assumed that respondents reported those concerns they (or others) have about the prospect of working with African-American students.

Preliminary analysis of the data has revealed that these education majors' concerns about working with culturally diverse students fall into four major categories: (1) concerns about the students' home/family life and general non-school backgrounds; (2) concerns about their own professional abilities including whether they (as teachers) have sufficient content knowledge about diverse cultures to teach about them, or sufficient knowledge about diverse students' learning style; (3) concerns about whether any pre-existing attitudes teachers have about race

could interfere with their professional interactions with students; and (4) concerns about the effects of institutionalized inequities in schools.

Additionally, two sub-themes, which seem to be related, appeared in the raw data. These sub-theme items did not fit neatly into the previously identified major categories, however they were cited frequently enough by respondents to provoke concern. They were: (1) items indicative of concern over the extent to which diverse students would utilize race as an excuse not to perform to their abilities; and (2) items reflective of concern over whether diverse students would label teachers as racist when there was no real justification for such labeling.

A preliminary conjectural analysis of these data suggests these sub-theme concerns possibly emanate from actual or vicarious experiences and pre-conceptions these pre-service education majors may hold about "diverse students" in general, and perhaps African-American students in particular. Most revealing however, is that the tone of the items in these sub-theme categories closely parallels the major thrust of Steele's discussion of the African-American student.

Steele addresses the well-known discussion of the deleterious effects of the self-fulfilling prophecy in schools serving African-Americans. However, he introduces the idea of personal choice in whether African-American students internalize the inferiority status offered them by society in general, and by

schools in particular. In discussing these two ideas, Steele has proposed that the below standard performance levels of African-American students as a group are due not so much to poor schools and lower teacher expectations, but rather to the internalized inferiority status that African-American students choose for themselves. He notes

> I think they choose to believe in their inferiority not to fulfill society's prophesy about them, but for the comforts and rationalizations their racial 'inferiority' affords them. They hold their race to evade individual responsibility. Their margin of choice scares them, as it does all people. They are naturally intimidated by that eternal tussle between the freedom to act and the responsibility we must take for our actions. To some extent all of us balk in the face of this. The difference is that these students use their race to conceal the fact that they are balking. Their 'inferiority' shields them from having to see that they are afraid of all-out competition with white students (p. 28).

Similarly, concern items noted by the pre-service education majors include: being accused of discrimination; ridding students of any prejudices they may have; knowing whether minority students feel comfortable around white students; understanding how racism affects diverse students' ability to grasp and

understand material that is being presented; implementing a valid curriculum that does not go overboard with special interest group information; reverse discrimination against whites; dealing with students who use racism as a crutch not to perform to their potential.

Both Steele and the pre-service education majors direct attention toward the role or responsibility of the students themselves in their low academic performance. On the one hand, pre-service education majors express concern over whether minority students will feel comfortable in the white (i.e integrated) environment of the school; however they also express concern over coming to understand exactly how racism could effect a students' ability to grasp school concepts. Implicit in these particular concern items is an iota of doubt over whether racial discrimination within the larger society has deleterious effects on school performance and if ultimately students should be able to overcome its deleterious effects.

It seems on one level, these pre-service education majors believe African-American students will experience discomfort in integrated settings, but on a different level, they believe these students may be prone to using race as an excuse for not performing in school.

These pre-service majors seem to presume African-American students will present a formidable challenge for them as prospective teachers. Further, my preliminary analysis of the

data suggest pre-service education majors sense that the barriers they are likely to face as teachers of African-Americans will be taxing to some significant degree because problems emanate from the choices the students themselves are likely to make.

Thus, this preliminary analysis of my data as juxtaposed with Steele's thesis encourages me to question whether persons training to be teachers are likely to be pre-disposed to identifying students themselves as being responsible, albeit unwittingly for sub-standard school performance. Some school analysts call this line of thinking blaming the victim because it fails to address how teachers and schools as institutions have historically under-challenged African-American students.

The impact of Steele's thesis as juxtaposed with the professional concerns of this group of pre-service teachers seems to present enormous challenges for addressing the needs of African-American students in particular. Unfortunately, it seems plausible to suggest that the models that are likely to emerge from Steele-like orientations may be incongruous with multicultural education goals aimed at reconceptualizing schools such that they more effectively and compassionately attend to the needs of <u>all</u> students.

Steele's thesis, as it might be manifested in pre-collegiate school personnel seems bent on maintaining the status quo. And the status quo has been for the most part inattentive to developing the full potential of African-American students. I,

for one, am not confident that persons oriented toward changing students while not effecting substantive changes in the institutional structure of schools have the best interest of African-American students (in particular) at heart. It seems to me that as we witness a proliferation of ideas grounded on the premise of making students fit into an existing ailing schooling system (as I believe such ideas are highly likely to emerge in the current socio-political climate), that the work of those committed to what some have labeled the reconstructionist goals of multicultural education is far from over.

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